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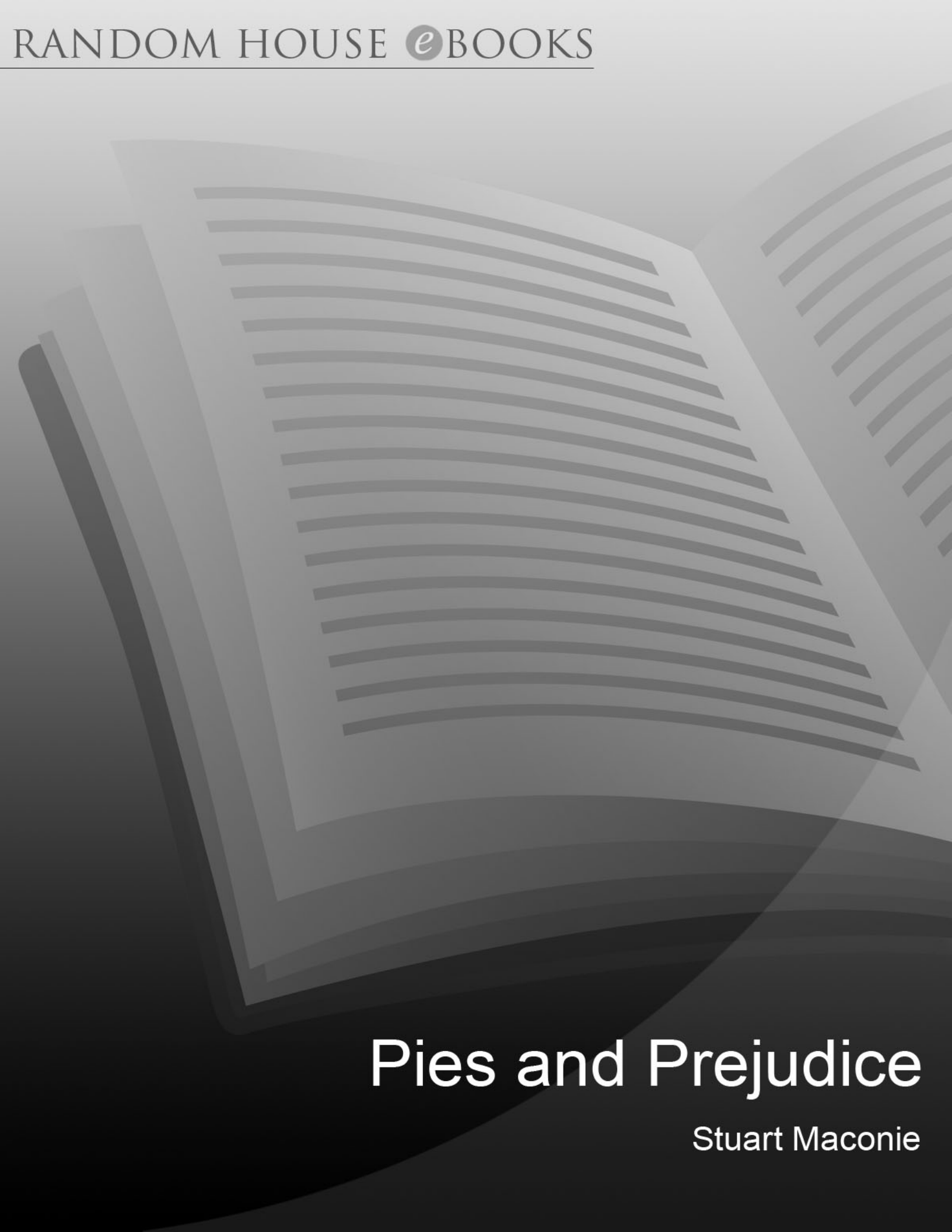

Pies and Prejudice

Stuart Maconie

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About the Book

A Northerner in exile, Stuart Maconie goes on a journey in search of the North, attempting to discover where the clichés end and the truth begins. He travels from Wigan Pier to Blackpool Tower and Newcastle's Bigg Market to the Lake District to find his own Northern Soul, encountering along the way an exotic cast of chippy Scousers, pie-eating woollybacks, topless Geordies, mad-for-it Mancs, Yorkshire nationalists and brothers in southern exile.

About the Author

Stuart Maconie is a broadcaster, journalist and writer familiar to millions from his work on radio and TV. He is a stalwart of Britain's most popular network, Radio 2, where he co-presents the *Radcliffe and Maconie* show during the week and has his own regular Saturday show. His BBC 6 music show *The Freak Zone* is a global cult and he has written and presented dozens of other shows across BBC radio and TV. His work as a journalist has appeared everywhere from *NME* and *Q Magazine* to the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Oldie*. His previous books include the official biographies of Blur and James as well as the best-selling musical odyssey *Cider with Roadies*. He lives in exile in the West Midlands and is happiest fell-walking with Muffin the dog.

Pies and Prejudice

In Search of the North

Stuart Maconie

For The Angels Of The North

‘If you’re an alien, how come you sound like you come from the north?’

‘Lots of planets have a north.’

Doctor Who, 2005

Prologue

A few years ago, I was standing in my kitchen, rustling up a Sunday brunch for some very hungover, very northern mates who were ‘down’ for the weekend. One of them was helping me out, finding essential ingredients like paracetamol and orange juice, and asked me, ‘Where are the sun-dried tomatoes?’

‘They’re next to the cappuccino maker,’ I replied.

A ghastly, pregnant silence fell. Slowly, we turned to meet each other’s gaze. We didn’t say anything. We didn’t need to. Each read the other’s unspoken thought; we had changed. We had become the kind of people who rustled up brunch on Sundays, passed around sections of the Sunday papers, popped down to little bakeries; the kind of people who had sun-dried tomatoes and cappuccino makers.

Southerners, I suppose.

Now before readers from Godalming and Sidcup, Aylesbury and Exeter hurl this book across the non-fiction section enraged, before they chuck it in the bin cursing the waste of a good book token when they could have got a nice Danielle Steel or Sven Hassel, let me explain. I don’t like thinking this way, like a Pict in an animal pelt, face blue with woad. I’d rather be cosmopolitan, suave, displaying an easy confidence with pesto and fish knives and the Hammersmith and City Line. I have tried to change, really I have. I say ‘lunch’. I say ‘book’ with an ‘uh’ not an ‘oooh’. Though I draw the line at ‘supper’ and ‘barth’.

But then again . . . Then again, I do have a cappuccino maker and some sun-dried tomatoes. Actually, moving with the times, of course, it’s now some sun-blushed tomatoes

(so much juicier, don’t you think, and lovely tossed in with balsamic and feta). But on some level, I feel it should be a plate of tripe and a pound of lard, the sort of food you want after a hard day digging coal from a three-foot seam or riveting steel plates – proper jobs, in fact, as opposed to tapping effeminately at a keyboard for hours on end or talking to yourself in a radio studio.

This book, then, is an attempt to rediscover both the north itself and my own inner northerner. Does the north still exist? Are the hand-wringing cultural theorists right when they talk of a Britain of identikit prefab towns each with a Body Shop, Costa Coffee and Waterstones? Or is the north still more likely to rejoice in a flagship Cash Converters than a flagship Harvey Nicks, whatever the fashionistas of Leeds might think?

The north. What is it? Where is it? Where does it begin and end, what does it mean to be northern and why, in a country that you could drop and easily lose in one of the American Great Lakes, does that two and a half hour journey from London to Manchester or Leeds still feel like crossing time zones, political borders and linguistic and cultural frontiers?

When we say the north, what do we really mean? It’s something both powerful (like Newcastle Brown) and attractively vague (like most Oasis lyrics). The north means the Lake Poets and Lindisfarne Island and at the same time sink estates, ASBOs and the AIDS capital of Britain (Doncaster, if you’re interested). The north is big and complicated. Square metres of it are crowded, square miles of it are almost deserted. Surprisingly for an area so well covered by CCTV, it still says ‘Here Be Dragons’ on the *Daily Telegraph* and Radio 4’s map of Britain.

And so, by supersaver and service station, by West Coast Main Line and M6, I began the journey back home. ‘Home is the place,’ wrote Robert Frost, ‘where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.’ But would it still feel like

home? Would they have to take me back? Would I want them to?

What kind of book is this that you have in your hand? I guess it's a travel book of sorts though it has little in common with many modern travel books. If you hang around the travel section of your local bookshop for a while you will notice how many modern travel books have titles that sing out with brisk and slightly wacky jauntiness: *Mind My Nose Flute! Bhutan on Three Dong a Day*, *To Tierra Del Fuego by Cement Mixer* or *Around Khazakstan with a Guinea Pig*. You can picture the authors, scrubbed-looking, enthusiastic men and women in big shorts and headscarves, pushing back the flaps of a tent on the Hindu Kush, inhaling deeply the desert air or emerging from a dilapidated shower block in a former Soviet Gulag and flicking the border guards with a towel.

By contrast I went to Harrogate. And Bury. And Haltwhistle. And Saddleworth. And Liverpool and Manchester. I went to a great many places, covered a lot of miles, saw a lot of gift shops and tearooms and city-centre regeneration displays and, boy, oh boy, a lot of high-visibility tabards and Greggs bakeries, as we shall see.

But even by the dire, apocalyptic, randomly privatised standards of the British transport system, a system so ill thought out that it takes longer to get to Norwich from Birmingham than from Birmingham to Moscow, these aren't epic journeys, and I knew many of the places quite well already. I didn't sleep under the stars with the Mujahideen, I slept in quite nice hotels most of the time, and the natives were largely friendly though getting a toasted teacake in Hexham proved dauntingly difficult.

Although I'm from Lancashire and this book is primarily about the north of England, I'd like to think it can be enjoyed by the fine people of the south of England too. My publishers are understandably as keen as mustard on this as well. I really hope that it's neither puff piece nor hatchet job.

I just wanted to share some thoughts about the place I come from, its people and cities and music and food and humour and landscapes and stuff and how I feel about it. It isn’t a guidebook in the sense that it isn’t exhaustive. You will look in vain for much about Grasmere or Grimsby. It’s my north and reflects both my centres of gravity, the directions that pulled me, the places that made me think, ‘I wonder what that place is like now,’ at the beginning of a shiny new millennium.

I hope this book is a love letter – one that makes you laugh, the best sort – but not just flannel and boasting about how bloody marvellous and decent and rugged and down-to-earth we are. Because we’re not, not all the time. Like an old friend, I love the north of England dearly while recognising its many faults and I hope I don’t shy away from them. They are part of its character. It can be grim up north, and heart-stoppingly beautiful.

It isn’t all football and fags. It’s politics and folklore, civil war and nuclear power, heavy industry and haute couture, poetry and Pina Colada, ships and shops, chips and fish, and football and fags, come to think of it.

And, of course, pies and prejudice.

The Beautiful South

THE BBC HAS no South of England Correspondent. I say this without malice or anger. I wouldn't want you to think that I'm eaten up with corrosive rage over it or that I'm making my way to Broadcasting House with a flaming brand even as we speak. It's just a fact of nature, like glaciers or osmosis. The BBC has no South of England Correspondent because it would be silly, like having a Correspondent for Unicorns, or Spontaneous Combustion.

Because like unicorns or spontaneous combustion, there is no south of England, if we're honest. There's a bottom half of England, naturally, otherwise the country would get all unravelled and damp around Nuneaton. But there isn't a south in the same way that there's a north. As all of my old geography teachers used to say at some point, get out your atlases and turn to the page marked England and Wales.

Run your finger idly from left to right across the expanse below Birmingham and what do you find? Cardiff . . . Well, that's Wales, obviously; Tom Jones, Charlotte Church, the Manic Street Preachers, rugby union, miners and big hats with buckles on. Next is Bristol, home of two underachieving football teams, trustafarian DJs and the BBC Wildlife Unit. Salisbury Plain suggests bullied squaddies with tearful, boot-blacked faces and druids mooching about in Ku Klux Klan-style hoods. Oxford is Radiohead and dreaming spires. London? We'll come back to that. Basildon? Nothing. A void. Apart from Depeche Mode, of course, and then we are on to Margate and the sudden hot vinegary tang of bladderwrack and fish and chips.

Apart from disclosing my own rather juvenile frame of reference (football, bands, er, hats), this tells us nothing. It's like a coach driver's acid flashback, lurid and random. If there were a cohesive thing called the south of England, you'd expect to hear some swelling music in the back of your mind (Vera Lynn singing 'The White Cliffs Of Dover', perhaps, or one of The Wurzels' agricultural ditties) and to feel some unifying emotion. But none is forthcoming.

This is because there's no conception of the south comparable to the north. Good or bad, 'the north' means something to all English people wherever they hail from. To people from London – cheery costermonger, cravated fop or Shoreditch-based web designer on stupid scooter alike – it means desolation, arctic temperatures, mushy peas, a cultural wasteland with limited shopping opportunities and populated by aggressive trolls.

To northerners it means home, truth, beauty, valour, romance, warm and characterful people, real beer and decent chip shops. And in this we are undoubtedly biased, of course. When northerners think of the south, what do they think of? Well, let's try a little word association prompted by the word 'northern'.

OK then.

Northern . . . Soul

Northern . . . Lights

Northern . . . Rock (it's a building society)

And now 'southern'. Let me see.

Southern . . . Comfort

Southern . . . Jessies

Southern . . . Fried Chicken

Far from scientific but enlightening nonetheless. Soul and Lights and Rock versus Comfort, Jessies and Chicken. Even the most sophisticated northerner harbours an inner barbarian with a molten core of prejudice.

We like to think we're different. But what makes us different? What shapes us? Well, we like to think that some

of the forces are elemental. The north-south divide was illustrated by a Trog cartoon in the *Observer* published during Thatcher's mid-eighties pomp: two smartly dressed yuppies are drinking champagne under a cloudless southern sky while at the other side of the frame, a dour middle-aged couple, rain-sodden beneath glowering clouds, are complaining, 'They've got their prime minister, why can't we have ours?' Crucially here, the difference between them is not just political or economic. It's climatic.

There's not much point me regaling you with statistics like Leeds being drier than Barcelona or Cornwall being wetter than Manchester or Sheffield's summers being generally warmer than Newquay's, true though these all are, apparently. What matters is perception and when we think of Brighton we think of nudists going gently pink, when we think of Devon we think of cream teas in the garden and when we think of Sunderland we think of a man with rime clinging to his beard leaning into a hail-peppered gale. In May.

The writer and TV producer Judith Holder has written that it's not that we get worse weather in the north, we just sort of get, well, more weather. Winds that take slates off in the night or have you asking someone two doors down for your dustbin back. Frosts that send old ladies skittling along pavements and kids mincing gingerly onto duck ponds despite what those scary public information films say. We relish our weather up north and we relish our capacity to endure it. A few years back I was at Highbury watching Arsenal play Sunderland and the difference in the two sets of supporters' apparel was hilarious. On a cold February day, the Gooners were togged up in car coats and parkas while at the away end, Mackems gathered happily in T-shirts and Fred Perrys. Watch Middlesbrough or Newcastle on their ventures into Europe and the camera will always find a gaggle of fat blokes with their shirts off, braving the

Bratislavan winter's night, waving and laughing as if to say, 'Call this cold, man. I'm finding it oppressive!'

As much as we delight in our own capacity to endure the elements, we deride the softness of southerners in this regard. When a Cornish village gets flooded and a state of emergency is declared, we tut in sympathy but secretly we think, 'What do you expect? You live on the beach,' and after looking at the TV pictures conclude that they wouldn't cancel the racing at Thirsk for that drop of rain. We reserve most of our scorn for London, where an inch of powdery snow has taxi drivers weeping and ashen-faced TV reporters telling people to stay indoors, wait for help and don't panic-buy baked beans. HELLO! IT'S DECEMBER! BUY A CAGOULE!

Weather carves the landscape to a degree. Rain and wind scour and groove the hills through waves of ice ages, green the fields, smooth the coastline. Millennia of freeze-thaw scatter splintered boulders in valleys gouged by the tides of ice. Weather acts like an artist's hand but the canvas predates it. The canvas is geology.

In this, as in so many things, the north is well hard, we think. Not for us the soft feminine allure of Downs and Wolds, the rolling pasture, the chalky uplands. No, the north is built from Skiddaw slate and Borrowdale volcanics, granite and limestone. It's only rocks but people can get very emotional and florid about them. Read the great Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson on the geology of his home town of Millom. Limestone even has its own Poet Laureate, the wonderful Wystan Hugh Auden.

When an undergraduate prodigy, Auden's limpid features, soft lips and dangling cigarette suggested every inch the southern intellectual. But he was born in York and called himself 'a son of the north', with a lifelong allegiance and kinship with the moorland of the North Pennines and the melancholic remains of the once-thriving lead-mining industry. Auden called it his 'Mutterland' and his 'great good place' and dated his artistic baptism to a moment of

epiphany in 1922 at Rookhope, County Durham, when he dropped a stone down a flooded mineshaft and felt a calling to write. He often wrote about these districts, hills and people and actually turned his hand to a travel piece in 1954: ‘England: Six Unexpected Days’, a suggested driving itinerary through the Pennine Dales.

Auden, largely single-handledly, reintroduced the Anglo-Saxon metre into English verse and he employed it in ‘In Praise Of Limestone’, with the following chilly lines, among my favourites in modern poetry:

An older colder voice, the oceanic whisper:
I am the solitude that asks and promises nothing;
That is how I shall set you free. There is no love;
There are only the various envies, all of them sad

The oceanic whisper, eh? He was good, wasn’t he? Later in life, the whey-faced Brideshead features hardened. Maybe it was the fags but he grew to look more northern, craggier, wrinkled as a walnut. His face famously was described as ‘a cake left out in the rain’, a phrase that Jimmy Webb borrowed for ‘MacArthur Park’. One of my colleagues in the English department at Skelmersdale College, Val, once looked at a picture of him on the back of his collected poems and said, ‘Good God, if that was his face, what must his testicles have been like?’

Skelmersdale, as we shall learn later, is a Viking name and up north we are proud of our Viking lineage. Now, I’m with Muriel Gray on the subject of facial hair – ‘Why bother growing a moustache? You could just write “I Am A Dickhead” on your top lip’ – but if all thoughts of common sense and aesthetics desert me and I grow a beard, it will turn out to be ginger. Gingerish, anyway. I used to be embarrassed about this when I looked enviously at the dark if bum-fluffish sidies of my teenage mates but now I’m rather proud. My auburn whiskers I take as proof of my

lineage right back to Eric Bloodaxe and evidence of the fact that my true calling is drinking from a giant horn at the prow of a longboat heading for a spot of pillage in Iceland. The country, not the discount freezer store, obviously.

Actually, the Vikings have had rather a bad press. True, they were not the gentle agrarians that some apologists say – *The Book of Common Prayer* had a bit in it about 'deliver us from the North Man' and for the 200 years up to the ninth century they were always popping over, helping themselves to local treasure, women and livestock – but they did do as much trading as raiding and eventually became absorbed into the racial mix, which is where my beard comes in. Their legacy is there as well as in all the dales and thwaites and leys in the region.

All of this makes us different, we think; harder, flintier, steelier. We are the ones who turn the air-conditioning down in the meeting room, who want to sit outside the pub in October, who order the hottest curries, the strongest beer, the most powerful drugs. We like to think we're different, and we cherish our prejudices.

But we can overcome these prejudices. When the resolutely northern pop group The Housemartins transformed themselves in the mid-eighties, they chose the new name The Beautiful South. Pretty much everyone thought this was a heavily ironic choice, to be said with a sneer. *The Sunday Times* simply assumed that it was 'a sarcastic dig at England's north-south divide'. In fact, singer Paul Heaton chose the name because 'it sounded nice, like a film'. And there are lots of things about the south of England that sound nice to me. There's the music of Vaughan Williams, with its heady scents of warm Gloucestershire afternoons, or The Clash, whose music is full of the even headier scents found beneath flyovers in west London. There's Powell and Pressburger's dreamlike films such as *A Canterbury Tale,* where Kent becomes a mythic Avalon. I like

Cornish pasties and M. R. James ghost stories and Dorset Blue Vinny cheese.

But none of these things say ‘the south’ in the same way that certain things, good or bad, true or false, whippet or flat cap, say ‘the north’. What would that mythical BBC South of England Correspondent be like? Bertie Wooster? Wurzel Gummidge? Mike ‘Runaround’ Reid? Prince Charles? What would he wear? A straw boater? Jodhpurs? A sheepskin jacket? Beefeater garb?

The BBC does have a North of England Correspondent and he conforms very much to type. He – and it is always he – is one of their more ‘lived-in’ presenters; a stocky man in his early fifties with jowls, a florid complexion and bullishly hetero moustache. He looks tough but somehow defeated, maybe an old rugby league pro with a messy, financially punishing divorce behind him and the beginnings of a drink problem (I suspect there may be a quarter of Bell’s in the pocket of that Gore-Tex anorak). Fiona in the nice warm London studio will ‘go over live’ to him and he’ll inevitably be found looking tense outside a courtroom in Bolton at the conclusion of a major drugs trial or by a burned-out Mondeo on a Yorkshire sink estate where some sort of armed siege is occurring. He never gets the heart-warming story about the unlikely friendship between the Doberman Pinscher and the hamster.

Where exactly is he? To many a south-based viewer, I guess he’s in that vague but colourful region, ‘Up North’. ‘Up North’ is a long way away. You wouldn’t want to go there. It’s a long trip, as in ‘West Ham face a long trip to Hartlepool for the third-round tie’. Note it’s never the other way round. It’s OK too to be blithely approximate about northern geography. Some years ago, we northerners chortled when Des Lynam suavely announced on *Final Score*: ‘Chesterfield 0, Chester 0. So no goals there in the local derby.’

A few years ago, I actually rang up Sky News frothing at the mouth to complain about a spectacularly half-arsed item

they'd done on Rochdale, whose football team were enjoying a good Cup run and had drawn a big club in a glamour tie. A fresh-faced reporter had been despatched to the town. From his amused anthropological tone, you might have thought that he'd been sent to Burkina Faso rather than the second largest metropolitan borough of Greater Manchester with a population of more than 200,000. He ended his report, and I am not making this up, by saying, 'If the team win tomorrow, they will have put little Rochdale on the map.' No, I think you'll find the pioneers of the international co-operative movement did that back in 1844 when they changed the course of world history. News obviously hasn't reached the Sky centre in Hounslow yet, though. Perhaps I have a chip on my shoulder, but at least it's a proper chip, properly fried and served with gravy and mushy peas.

But let's not get too steamed up and tipsy on righteous indignation. If southerners do sometimes think it should read 'Here Be Dragons' on the map once you're past Watford, then we in the north can be just as sketchy about the south. What, for instance, does the south mean to me personally?

I am attractively vague about Suffolk, Sussex and Surrey. I routinely confuse them all though if I stop and think for a moment I can place Suffolk. As the name suggests, it's south of Norfolk. On one of my few trips to the area, the late John Peel picked me up at the station in his battered Mercedes. I couldn't get into the passenger seat, which was taken up with shopping or some such, so I sat in the back, taxi-style. As we moved through the decidedly staid and sweet environs of the town, Peel turned and over his shoulder said in broadest Manhattan cabbie-ese, 'So, how ya doin', bud? First time in Stowmarket?' We went to the village pub for steak pie (he and Sheila had the veggie lasagne) and it was all rather darling and slightly *Terry and June*. I've never been back to Suffolk; there's never been

any need to. I guess that's precisely what Peelie loved about it.

Norfolk is a closed book to me. A closed book that has got some bad, rather sniggering reviews: Alan Partridge, Bernard Matthews, *Sale of the Century* and Delia Smith have conjoined like unlucky stars to make it a bit of a joke, a new shorthand for the rural sticks, sort of Crinkley Bottom goes *Deliverance*. I'm ashamed to say I have never been to Norwich though I'm told it's delightful. Even the supporters of Ipswich Town, though – hardly Los Angeles itself – mock Norwich folk for their yokelism in what is perhaps my favourite football chant, sung to the tune of *The Addams Family*:

Your sister is your mother
Your father is your brother
You all shag one another, the Norwich family

Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire are merely a gentle fog of airports and weddings. Middlesex conjures up only cricket and Russell Grant, the roly-poly astrologer who has campaigned tirelessly to get Middlesex reinstated as a county or made administrative capital of Europe or something.

Essex I do know a little about as I lived there briefly in the 1980s, courtesy of a girlfriend's hospitality at a time when Margaret Thatcher was trying her hand at starving her enemies (students, miners, old people, children) into submission. My girlfriend lived in a place called Chadwell Heath; chiefly famous, if at all, for being the place where West Ham United train. Indeed, if Billy Bonds or Julian Dicks ever go out for an evening there, they will never have to put their hand in their pocket.

I went for several nights out there. I had to put my hand in my pocket an awful lot, it seemed to me. 'Southern prices,' we'd grizzle, after handing over most of our dole money for

a pint of gaseous, urine-coloured but strangely tasteless liquid with an unconvincing cod-Hungarian name. Most of these nights out are etched in my mind and bring forth an involuntary shudder. This was the mid-1980s, after all, when a night out in Romford was a nightmarish blur of white stilettos, fun pubs and hair-gelled lotharios with earrings and plastic slip-ons who could turn nasty at any moment. Nights out soundtracked by Wham! and Luther Vandross, the banshee wail of car alarms and the whirring rotors of a police helicopter, girls cackling, fruit machines exploding with shrapnel and the mournful cry of 'Leave it, Gaz, he's not worth it'. Maybe it's still like that. I'm certainly not going back to find out.

It could be that my desperate emotional state has coloured my view of Essex. I met some lovely people there. Billy Bragg for one. But what struck me most, perhaps parochially, were the slight but powerful cultural differences. There was the happy hour, during which office workers in Top Man suits would neck cheap Löwenbräu and spritzers before falling asleep on the train and ending up in Southend with drool on their lapels and numb faces. Now I'd been brought up on a strict and manly regime of daily pub-going but this seemed wrong, immoral, against some natural law. Drinking at half past five? Everyone knew that you went straight home after work, fell asleep in front of *Blockbusters* with Bob Holness, had a Findus crispy pancake and a shower and met up again at half seven. It took me a while to realise that the happy hour, which had begun in Manhattan and migrated to Essex, fitted perfectly the drinking community it served, i.e. people who went to work in a suit or at least in regular clothes and thus would feel comfortable perched on a barstool with an overpriced lager. The thought of going straight out on the town (and possibly the pull) if you were black-faced with engine grease, wearing overalls and clutching an oily rag was less attractive. This was the north-south divide writ large via the licensed victualler trade.

Heading west, Wiltshire means little beyond maverick musician Julian Cope, who moved there to be nearer the ancient barrows, mounds and stone circles that he's frankly nuts about. I've visited him there a couple of times and once, while on the train back, I saw Princess Anne at Swindon station shouting about car parking. She was wearing a khaki body warmer, sporting that horrid hairstyle (clearly the royal family haven't heard of conditioner) and flanked by a huge vicious-looking dog and an armed guard. Now, she's a pillar of the community and Copey's the freak. But from where I was standing, it was hard to tell. What with the barking and braying.

Hampshire says practically nothing to me. I once spent several freezing hours at the impossibly grim Southsea terminal waiting for a ferry and, er, that's about it. Those Needles look great, though, rising from the Solent like dragons' teeth. And I do remember defence secretary Geoff Hoon using Hants as a reference during the early days of the invasion of Iraq when British soldiers were patrolling the city of Umm Qasr. 'Umm Qasr is a city similar to Southampton,' he informed the Commons, prompting one British squaddie to reply to an interviewer, 'He's either never been to Southampton, or he's never been to Umm Qasr. There's no beer, no prostitutes and people are shooting at us. It's more like Portsmouth.'

Dorset is a wild night out in Bournemouth with Blur's Alex James, a native of the once genteel, now almost lawless (according to the *Daily Mail*) seaside town. Weymouth is known as the Naples of Dorset. But is Naples the Weymouth of Italy? From my brief experience of Naples, it was violent, squalid, Mafia-run and at the time home to the world's best footballer. Perhaps Weymouth is actually like this, but I think not since the local newspaper for the day on which I write reads, and I quote, 'Pensioners book early to beat the rush for free bus passes.' I fancy they won't be remaking *The Godfather* there any day soon. Oh, and of course there's

Thomas Hardy and some nice people I know called Wilf and Trish, who run a great little pub. The pub's in Cumbria, though.

Bristol is the gateway to cider and clichés. Rolling hills, seagull-haunted cliffs and long, long vowel sounds. I went on holiday to Minehead in Somerset frequently as a child but apart from a trip to Cheddar Gorge, this was spent in the confines of the Butlins holiday camp and, like airports and Hard Rock Cafes, Butlins is the same wherever you go – and reassuringly so to its many fans, an international language of donkey derbies, crazy golf and disco-dancing contests, at least in 1976. It had Britain's first – and therefore 'biggest and best' – dry ski slope. Despite this, Somerset's skiers have underachieved badly at the Winter Olympics.

In my desultory mental sketchbook, Devon is clotted cream, the Lib Dem heartland of the English Riviera and little cottages. On a recent trip to Plymouth, though, I saw at first hand in their native habitat that relatively new British social group, the urban yokel, or if you prefer, rural chavs – fifteen pimply youths in Burberry caps and Henri Lloyd jackets, racing their Golf GTIs at high speed round a deserted multi-storey car park in a mildly threatening manner. Once you get to Cornwall, it really is a foreign country and all the better for it, more Brittany than Britain, strange and remote, with names taken from witches' spells like Zennor and Mevagissey. Sadly, even this Arthurian land is not untouched by twenty-first-century malaises. If you visit Land's End, and well worth it it is, too, you can pay three quid to park your car and be ushered into 'a range of award-winning undercover exhibitions and attractions' or you can walk half a mile to the actual Land's End, get wet and blown about, look down at the churning waves (resisting that odd compulsion to leap off) and throw bits of sandwich to the gulls. On the day of my visit, every other car was unloading its visitors into the various Land's End 'experiences'.

That’s about it for me and the south, then. Every generation, the people of the northern diaspora fan out across southern Britain, like the arrows at the start of *Dad’s Army*, in search of work and the like, but unless we put down very deep and gnarly roots most of us never really get the hang of it and are always prone to Des-style mix-ups between Chippenham and Chipping Norton, Canning Town and Camden Town, Hertfordshire and Herefordshire.

There’s one part of the south, however, that northerners do know, and are both simultaneously drawn to and repelled by like moths in cloth caps. It’s a place they hate to love and love to hate. They may work there, play there, spend their lives there, but they are never really from there; their heart is in the misty north, as they will tell you in their flat and honest vowels, tears in their eyes, after a third rose-petal bellini at the Groucho Club.

Like Doctor Who, Doctor Fox and Miami Sound Machine’s Doctor Beat, Doctor Johnson was not a real doctor. He’d have been no good with your plague, scurvy or ague though he would have undoubtedly been top of eighteenth-century medical league tables when it came to elegant aphorisms. One of his most famous is: ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life.’

Not necessarily true, though, is it? Yes, you may be tired of life but you may just be tired of the Northern Line, the shit drivers, the overpriced paninis, the guns, the congestion charge, the automated ticket barriers, the Hanger Lane gyratory and Chelski.

Wordsworth famously said of the view from Westminster Bridge that ‘earth has not anything to show more fair’. This is mental, particularly from someone who lived in the Lake District, where there is something more fair around every hummock. I mean, it’s all right. There’s a big, greasy-looking river and some tugs and the odd dredger. There’s the London Eye, a piece of London that is forever Blackpool, and there’s the rather handsome old GLC building. On the other

side there's a couple of flash office blocks and Big Ben, of course. So, all in all, you know, pretty good but 'earth has not anything to show more fair'? Mental. And Wordsworth was the one who wasn't doing all the drugs. His mate Thomas De Quincey, who was whacked off his gourd on opium most of the time and didn't care who knew it, put it rather differently: 'A duller spectacle this earth of ours has not to show than a rainy Sunday in London.' Another Lake poet chum, Percy Bysshe Shelley, was even harsher: 'Hell is a city much like London.' I wouldn't go that far but I, like most northerners, maintain a cordial suspicion of 'the Smoke', even though I must have spent months of my life there since my first visit, which was on Saturday 28 April 1973.

Amazing powers of recall? Tragic hoarder of youthful diaries? Neither. Many northerners, maybe most, can tell you the date of their first trip to the capital. They can tell you what they were wearing as well – probably some multicoloured scarf, bobble hat, daft wig or replica shirt ensemble – because for most of us our first time is for the football. Up Wembley Way to the Twin Towers and thence inside a really quite crap football stadium.

That first trip to London, a formative experience for many a northerner, rattle in hand, full of wonder and optimism, is beautifully and memorably captured in an evocative short film of the 1970s. Late on a winter's Saturday evening, passengers disembark from a coach onto a darkened backstreet in Newcastle. Waiting relatives greet warmly; one welcomes a teenage boy cheerily. 'Four-nil at the Arsenal, what about that?' The boy walks on, hands in pockets, surly and uncommunicative. The relative tries again. 'Four-nil away to the Arsenal . . . You must be delighted.' The boy turns sourly and replies, 'Aye, but I had a packet of crisps a dog would have curled his lip at.'

All right, it wasn't an early effort by Peter Greenaway but an advert for leading Geordie snack comestible Tudor crisps,

but it rang true. London would promise much to the provincial – excitement, glamour, sophistication – but this would turn out to be a chimera. Realising this, we'd return home soberly to regale school and work mates with news of London – much as we might have done in the Middle Ages – and they would listen, appalled, to our tales of people who didn't chat at bus stops, overpriced beer and crisps that canines would demur at.

My second trip to London was in the late 1970s when I went with the other precocious teenagers from Mr Spruce's first-year history of art 'A' level group from St John Rigby College. A few months' acquaintance with Modigliani and Rothko had made me quite the young bohemian and I stowed an illicit pack of Gauloises Disque Bleus in my clean underwear, one of the most vile cigarettes ever invented and must-have accessory of the seventies poseur. Armed with these, how could I fail to pull pale, winsome young women in the Tate café? That's if I could make them out through the noxious blue-green fug.

We stayed in Onslow Gardens, Kensington, and dined out in a variety of styles and cuisines. On the first night we went to the International House of Pancakes – oversold rather by its title, I always think – but on the second night, emboldened by our new familiarity with London, we went to a real Italian restaurant and ordered penne arrabiata and a carafe of the house red and chatted loudly about Fauvism and Matisse. I felt like James Bond or at the very least Brian Sewell. Later, though, we reverted to type by 'accidentally' setting off the sprinkler system in the hotel. Next day, Mr Spruce gave us a very public dressing down rich in expletives at Green Park Tube station.

Ah, the Tube. Before we first visit London, every northerner secretly fears the Tube; it sounds like something out of *Quatermass and the Pit* and the map at first glance looks like a Piet Mondrian or an autopsy diagram of one of a cow's four stomachs. Then we slowly become acclimatised

to it and eventually we come to pride ourselves on our knowledge of it, wearing it as a badge of honour in a way no Londoner ever would. It's our version of The Knowledge, the arcane lore of the London cabbie: 'Royal College of Art, mate, no problem. Bakerloo to Embankment, across the footbridge, five stops to High Street Ken, stand in the rear carriage, the exit's right in front of you, lovely cappuccino at the café by the florist's. Tell Carlo I sent you . . .'

The Tube map, done in his spare time in 1931 by London Transport employee Harry Beck, is justly famous as a brilliant design concept. Beck grasped that since the railway ran mostly underground, the actual physical locations of the stations were irrelevant in knowing how to get to one station from another; only the topology of the railway mattered. London Transport didn't think it would catch on. Now, it's way more than a traveller's tool. It's iconic. You can buy posters and T-shirts featuring it and there's a very funny non-game based around it called Mornington Crescent (tune in to *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*, the funniest programme on the radio). It's even been turned into a rather sweet piece of art by Simon Patterson called 'The Great Bear'.

The Tube itself is quite brilliant in what it does, i.e. transporting people cheaply and efficiently from one bit of London to another. It's unsurpassed as a marriage of form and function. But for all the licensed buskers playing jazz guitar arrangements of Mozart and the poems on the underground and the tarted-up stations, it remains the unloveliest thing ever. Off-peak, it's soulless; at rush hour it's a fetid and dehumanising journey into hell which, as Jean-Paul Sartre nearly said, is other people's armpits. Last night's garlic and the thin hiss of an iPod wafts gently down the metal tube between the serried ranks of tired, anxious commuters seething with resentment at the relaxed laughter, radiant youth and gigantic wardrobe-sized rucksacks of the Italian teenagers standing by the doors.

Not even the most sentimental of Cockneys can ever have grown moist-eyed thinking of it. Unlike the Glasgow sleeper, no one could write a stirring John Buchan-style romantic thriller around it. They tried with *Sliding Doors* and it was unspeakable.

No one can ever be part of the queue traipsing up those steps at the Central Line at Tottenham Court Road looking blank-eyed at the adverts for *Chicago* and cut-price electrical stores without feeling part of some grim forced march or ritual sacrifice. The Goodge Street lifts – there are four of them and they wouldn't look out of place in an industrial-sized abattoir – always feel like a dispiriting social experiment into how rude, panic-stricken and dehumanised the average commuter can become. Glassy-eyed with fatigue and the fear that they may have to wait ten seconds for the next one, they charge in, crushing old ladies and tiny Japanese schoolgirls underfoot. Maybe they're all really keen to get out of London.

Periodically, different bits of London become fashionable. It was Camden back in the heady, buzzy Britpop boom of the mid 1990s when gaggles of trendy Japanese girls would go to the Good Mixer pub in search of Damon Albarn and find only three members of Menswear and a pool table. For the last few years, it has been the East End. Shoreditch, Hoxton and Hackney are three conceptual entities jostling to occupy the same physical space with residents of the area altering their addresses in line with current fashion. At the time of writing, Hoxton is winning and is the 'manor' de la mode. That said, Hackney is 'edgier'. If you crave the kudos of living somewhere 'edgy', i.e. with a high burglary rate and a good chance of getting mugged at a bus stop by a fifteen-year-old crackhead, you'll say you live in Hackney. 'Edginess' is another notion we northerners find hard to understand and rather laughable. Having often grown up in dangerous parts of hard towns rather than, say,

Cheltenham, we're in no hurry to move back to such places, however good it is for our street cred.

I'm actually writing these words in Old Shoreditch station. It isn't a station any more, of course, but a rather chichi coffee bar where I'm playing with the froth of my vanilla latte. I think the man at the next table is the lead singer of a minor indie band on their third or fourth album. I catch a trailing strand of conversation from the table to my left. 'I'm, like, saving up like crazy cos I want to spend four months in South America.' It is all a very Shoreditch scenario.

The tiny alleys and spidery streets around ultra-fashionable Hoxton Square are crowded with Vietnamese kitchens, margarita bars and happening clubs whose flyers boast DJ sets by Gilles Peterson and all-night 'crunk' and 'grime'. It would seem next to impossible to buy anything useful, like a pair of pliers or an umbrella, but day or night you will never want for a plate of sushi or a twelve-inch dubplate. The older generation of taxi drivers will tell you that before its gentrification, this was a bad neighbourhood, a notorious den of rogues, a thieves' kitchen. At three quid for a milky coffee, I reckon it still is.

The East End, the quintessential London, is more conceptual than actual. Successive waves of Luftwaffe bombers, town planners, developers and immigrants have altered the shape and make-up of the area for ever but Cockney mythology and iconography hold some things very dear. They get all maudlin and tearful about some stuff while northerners view them with a mixture of boredom, mirth and hostility.

Chelsea Pensioners and Pearly Kings, for instance. What is it about London that even the old codgers and market traders have to ponce about in ridiculous costumes doing what can only be described as 'showing off'? Northerners – and I say this fully cognisant of exception-proving rule breakers like Liam Gallagher and Freddie Starr – are

generally inoculated against showing off by slaps administered in childhood. ‘Showing off’, like ‘showing us up’, commits the cardinal sin of drawing attention to yourself. Pearly Kings and Queens: really, what is all that about? They are market traders, the people who sell you knock-off batteries and pressure cookers and snide versions of Nike tracksuits. Chelsea pensioners at least have served their country in the military; that’s how they get the dubious honour of a three-quarter-length scarlet tunic and a stupid hat.

The north-south divide is not just geographical and cultural, it’s temperamental. Northerners are often referred to from a southern perspective as dour, perhaps because we don’t see the heart-warming side of the Kray Twins or because our fishmongers don’t dress in rhinestones and throw parades. We secretly treasure this opinion of us and have even turned it into a cultural emblem, be it Les Dawson’s bleak, grotesque humour, Joy Division looking miserable in long overcoats on a Hulme flyover or Alan Bennett’s self-mocking melancholia. Take chimney sweeps. A northern Victorian chimney sweep would, very sensibly, feel that life had dealt him a poor hand and as he forced another urchin up the flue he’d probably utter a grim aphorism and hawk up some phlegm. Compare this with the London chimney sweep as portrayed by Dick Van Dyke, always grinning, tap-dancing and singing about how lucky he is to know ‘Maori Parpens’.

Nothing about the Cockney proletariat sets our teeth on edge more than their ‘cheeriness’. A few years back, I went to see *My Fair Lady* starring Martine McCutcheon at the National Theatre. Pretty good it was too. But halfway through, something really quite dreadful happened. The scene changed from Park Lane to what was unmistakably some theatre director’s notion of a ‘cheery’ down-at-heel street scene in Lambeth or the Isle of Dogs. Slatternly women in shawls shrieked horribly as ‘cheery’